

The Jewish Weekly

A Shabbat of Silence and Leadership in Surfside

By Eli Schochet

It was Friday night, early Shabbat morning - June 26, 2021 - less than 48 hours after the tragic collapse of the Champlain Towers in Surfside, Florida. The air was thick with smoke, grief and uncertainty.

That night, I was among a group of Hatzalah members and medical professionals from the Surfside Jewish community who had just completed a long shift at the Family Reunification Center, providing emergency medical care, writing prescriptions for lost medications, and offering emotional support to survivors and displaced families. As Shabbat settled in, we felt ourselves drawn towards Ground Zero. We walked over to recite a chapter of Tehillim.

What we expected to be a chaotic rescue scene was, instead, hauntingly silent. No shouting. No urgency. Just an eerie stillness. A line of firefighters sat slouched on the curb in full gear, looking disoriented and drained. A few responders walked solemnly across the rubble.

A lone water fire rescue truck stood nearby, spraying a steady stream of water over the smoking rubble, not just to cool the site, or to extinguish the fires, but as if to symbolically quench a tragedy still unfolding.

While at Ground Zero, surrounded by the eerie silence, a nurse with us, Sara Raskin, finally gave voice to what we were all thinking. "What's going on here? Why is nothing being done? We have to do something!" Her words cut through the heavy silence and expressed the gnawing frustration that had taken hold of all of us.

Moments later, an officer from Miami-Dade Fire Rescue approached us unsolicited. She was visibly anxious and emotionally strained, yet open. She shared an unfiltered and deeply emotional account of what she believed was happening at the scene. There was pain in her voice and urgency. It was clear that she, too, felt trapped in the stillness. She wanted to act but felt unable to break through the red tape.

We listened carefully, and then one of us asked, "If there was anything you could change right now, what would it be?"

Her answer was immediate: "Sound the alarm. Get us access. Even if it means we're doing a bucket brigade. But we can't sit here doing nothing."

It is important to note that nothing in this account is meant to cast blame or suggest that a different outcome could have been guaranteed. The responders on the scene - firefighters, law enforcement, and medical personnel - were navigating an unimaginably complex and dangerous situation. Their courage, dedication, and professionalism deserve the highest respect. This story is not an indictment of what was or wasn't done, but a reflection of what it felt like to be present in that moment - grappling with helplessness, urgency, and the overwhelming desire to help.

We immediately began making phone calls, reaching out to contacts - people we thought might be able to help move things forward. We hit one brick wall after another. No one had answers. In fact, everyone had the same response: there is nothing you can do.

That's when I thought of my uncle, Rabbi Sholom DovBer Lipskar. He and my aunt, Chani, had started The Shul of Bal Harbour 40 years earlier, building from scratch the area's massive Jewish community. I knew my uncle and aunt had moved into his office in The Shul to be even more available for their community during this unfolding crisis. "We need to speak to my uncle," I told the group. "If anyone can give direction at this moment, it's him."

It was well into the night by the time we arrived at The Shul and made our way to his office. I knocked gently. My aunt called out, "Who's there?" "It's Eli, your nephew." "What do you need?" "There are serious concerns about what's happening at Ground Zero. We need to speak to Sholom."

There was a short pause, then she replied, "Sholom will be out in two minutes."

We sat down to wait around the table outside his office. A moment later he emerged, dressed in his Shabbat clothing, kapota and all, calm and composed - but alert. He listened as we explained what we had seen. He asked clear, incisive questions. After a few minutes, he stood up and said, "I need to see the site myself."

He began to prepare, reaching for a raincoat - but I stopped him. "It's not a walking situation. We have to drive." He immediately replied, "It's pikuach nefesh."

When there is even a chance of saving a life, pikuach nefesh, the laws of Shabbat, so precious and immutable, are cast aside.

We piled into a car and headed down the northbound side of Collins Avenue - closed off due to the collapse. The closer we got, the thicker the smoke in the air. We donned masks and approached the site, only to be stopped by an official telling us we couldn't be there.

Rabbi Lipskar didn't argue. He said nothing. But the pain and determination in his face said everything. The man stepped aside.

Rabbi Lipskar walked through the area, taking it in fully, asking questions, thinking aloud. Then the ranking officer arrived. Without hesitation, Rabbi Lipskar walked beside him, pressing him for answers. Respectful, but resolute. He wasn't there for ceremony - he was there for solutions.

Throughout the interaction, the Hatzalah paramedic who was accompanying our group was Eli Bryski. He had been working closely with families at the reunification center and was present on behalf of Hatzalah. From within our group, he served as the primary guide and point of coordination for Rabbi Lipskar that night, helping to navigate the moment with sensitivity and purpose.

Then the Rabbi turned to me and said, "Eli, I need my phone." He told me where it was, and I quickly left to retrieve it.

When I returned, he made three calls - each one deliberate, focused. One to the office of the then-Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett. Another to the office of

It Once Happened...

Senator Rick Scott. A third to the office of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis. The order didn't matter. What mattered was that the right people heard the right words.

He finished his calls without fanfare. We drove him back to The Shul. But he wasn't done. He stayed in contact with us through Shacharit the next morning. And by then, word had come: the Israeli search and rescue team was being deployed.

We spent the next three Shabbats at Ground Zero, offering medical support to the Israeli team and other responders. On one of those Shabbos mornings, Colonel Golan Vach - the commander of the Israeli rescue unit - shared something that left an impression on us all.

He explained that after 9/11, he had mobilized his team to join the rescue effort in New York. But red tape and political hurdles kept them grounded. They never made it.

After Surfside, it felt like history might repeat itself. Colonel Vach was once again told the odds of being granted access were slim. "It's one building," he was told. "In a small town called Surfside."

By Shabbat morning, he had been all but stood down. And then, his commanding officer delivered a new message: "You and your team are activated. Get going."

Rabbi Lipskar's three calls had done their part.

The rest is documented history. The Israeli team arrived in Florida, bringing with them knowledge, experience, spiritual strength, and a coordinated effort that reignited a stalled response. They became the heart of the search operation, and their presence gave hope to families and dignity to victims.

We had witnessed it unfold, how a quiet Friday night conversation in The Shul became a catalyst for global rescue coordination.


At the center of it all was my uncle, Sholom. No title in emergency response. No formal command. Just a kapota, a clear mind, a heart full of responsibility, and an unshakable conviction that he was acting with the strength and mission of his sender, the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory.

This year, on the 5 Iyar, Rabbi Sholom DovBer Lipskar returned his soul to his Maker. The wound is still fresh. The absence is still sharp. But so is the clarity of his impact.

That Shabbat night in Surfside wasn't an isolated moment - it was a reflection of who he was every day. A man who lived for others. Who showed up. Who carried the weight of community, of responsibility, of truth.

On a night when the world stood still, he rose. And even now, he continues to lift us.

Reprinted from an email of Chabad.org.



Shabbat Times – Parshat Behaalotecha

	Candle Lighting	Motzei Shabbat	Motzei Shabbat ר"ת
Jerusalem	7:10	8:28	9:03
Tel Aviv	7:25	8:31	9:01
Haifa	7:18	8:33	9:05
Be'er Sheva	7:26	8:29	9:02

Torah is Better than Gold By Rabbi Chaim Mentz

Over 1600 years ago, lived this great Sage, Rabbi Abba, had great love for his people and traveled around encouraging them to study the Holy Torah. One day he arrived in a small town where there were no Torah scholars. In fact, most of the townspeople there were ignorant. Rabbi Abba felt sorry for them and decided on a plan by which he could increase their Torah learning.

One morning he came into the local synagogue and made an announcement: "Whoever would like to have great wealth and be granted life in the next world should come and learn Torah with me!" He managed to stir up a lot of interest amongst the local people and many came to study with him. Through his kind demeanor and clear method of teaching he developed a circle of eager and steady Torah learners.

One day a new face showed up at the study session. It was an intelligent-looking young man who approached Rabbi Abba, saying: "I heard about your promise of riches if one studies Torah and I would like to begin my study so that I may be able to receive them."

"Very well," replied the rabbi. Of course, Rabbi Abba hadn't meant that his students would receive actual physical gold, but spiritual riches when they learned Torah. He was sure, though, that the young man would soon come to that conclusion himself when he had developed a true appreciation of Torah. "Who are you, what is your name?" the rabbi inquired.

"I live in this town and my name is Yosay," the young man answered.

"Well, Yosay, you are welcome to join our group. From this day on your name will be Yosay the Rich!" Yosay's face lit up when he heard these words, as visions of gold shone in his eyes. Yosay came to study with Rabbi Abba every morning without fail. He grasped the material easily and Rabbi Abba saw in this young man the potential for greatness.

One day Yosay wasn't his usual self. He sat listlessly looking out of the window throughout the entire study period. When it ended Rabbi Abba approached him and asked, "Yosay, my son, what is bothering you today? I missed your questions. Today you seem to be somewhere else."

"Rabbi, I have been studying diligently for weeks and yet I haven't received any of the riches you promised me," said Yosay in an accusatory tone. Rabbi Abba was saddened to hear him speak in such a fashion, for

he had hoped that by now, Yosay would have begun to love Torah study for its own sake. Nevertheless, he didn't want to dissuade him from his learning and so he answered, "My son, you are doing very well. Just be patient and continue. I have no doubt that one day you will be rich."

After hearing his teacher's encouraging words Yosay felt better and continued to study as before, but Rabbi Abba was worried about him. Would he continue to study long enough to reach his great potential, or would he give up because of his expectation of receiving a material reward?

One afternoon as Rabbi Abba was sitting alone and poring over his parchments, a strange, well-dressed gentleman approached him. "Are you Rabbi Abba?" the man inquired. "Yes, how may I help you?"

"Rabbi, I have heard that you are a great scholar and I'm hoping that you will be able to help me. I am a very wealthy man, but I never had the opportunity to study Torah. Now I am very busy and I don't have the time or ability to begin studying at this late stage in my life. Therefore, I would like to pay someone else to learn in my place. Here, I have a solid gold goblet. It is worth a great deal of money, and I have eleven more cups just like this. I am willing to give a golden cup to whomever will 'sell' me a share in his Torah learning."

Rabbi Abba jumped at the offer. Losing not a moment he called Yosay over and introduced him to the wealthy gentleman. He explained the arrangement, and Yosay was, of course, more than happy to agree. Both parties were satisfied. Yosay devoted himself to his studies more and more diligently, until he could hardly tear himself away from the holy texts. He barely ever thought about the gold.

One evening, Rabbi Abba was alarmed to hear weeping coming from Yosay's corner of the study hall. "What happened? Why are you weeping?" he asked, fearing that his student had received bad news. "Rabbi, I can't stand it any more! I hate the thought that I am learning G-d's Torah for a monetary reward. At first, the money was my sole motivation, but now that I understand much more, I see that my actual reward is the knowledge itself. I have gained so much and feel a great difference in myself. Now I feel like a thief taking gold in return for my beloved spiritual labors. I was foolish to make a deal like this and I just wish I could get out of it."

Rabbi Abba blinked back tears of joy, for he saw that his prize student had truly matured in his learning. His greed for riches had disappeared and been replaced with a genuine love of Torah. Rabbi Abba summoned the rich man and said, "You have reaped great rewards in Torah and mitzvot from your bargain with Yosay, but now it is time for you to share your wealth with another poor student. I will help you find a new partner. Meanwhile, know that you have succeeded greatly in this 'deal.'"

When Yosay heard what his rabbi and teacher had done for him, he couldn't contain his happiness. Yosay continued to study Torah for the rest of his long life and taught Torah to his children and grandchildren. He became known as "Yosay the Golden" because he had exchanged his rewards of gold for the study of Torah.

Reprinted from an email from Here's My Story.

Here are two key features of outstanding Jewish leadership...

They are presented to us in this week's Parshah.

The ancient Levites, were the spiritual leaders of our people.

The Torah says 'כי נתנים נתנים המה לי'. Hashem pronounces they will be presented, they will be presented to Me.

Why is the word 'נתנים' – 'to be presented', repeated?

Rashi comments 'נתונים למשא, נתונים לשיר' – they are to be presented because of their carrying, they are to be presented because of their singing.

What are we referring to here?

The Levites were the people who carried all the parts of the Mishkan from place to place to guarantee that wherever the Israelites were, the Mishkan would be right at the heart of their camp.

Thanks to the Levites, the people never strayed physically away from the sanctuary, as a symbol of the fact that wherever they were in life, they should always take Hashem with them.

That is the mark of a true leader, somebody who guarantees that the community doesn't only feel the presence of Hashem in Shul, but wherever we are. That when we are in the office, when we are on holiday, when we are on vacation, when we are engaging in leisure – our Yiddishkeit will always be an integral part of what we are.

The ultimate mark of true leadership is not what happens in Shul, but rather what happens in our lives as a result of Shul.

This brings me to the second key element of outstanding leadership, 'נתונים לשיר', the Levites used to lead the community in song. We need to feel our Judaism, there needs to be spirituality. We cannot just go through the mechanical output of activity; it needs to touch us.

As a result, through the spiritual experiences that we have, we will be motivated to guarantee that we don't only live a materialistic way of life, but rather that we are forever connected to our Creator.

So let's connect to Hashem by praying with all our hearts, for the healing of all those injured, for the safe return of those taken as hostages, as well as Divine Protection for our brave IDF soldiers, police officers, medical professionals, firefighters, ZAKA members, security personnel and all those citizens protecting us in Israel as well as around the world, and for those who need healing, shidduchim, children or parnassah and may we be blessed to have the most awesome, gorgeous, beautiful, peaceful, healthy, amazing, relaxed, spiritual, sweet, and happy Shabbat.

Yossi

בהעלותך

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MITZVOT ASEH: 3
MITZVOT LO TAASEH: 2

NUMBER OF PESUKIM: 136
NUMBER OF WORDS: 1840
NUMBER OF LETTERS: 7055

HAFTORA: Zechariah 2:14 - 4:7

This week we study Chapter 2 of Pirkei Avot